

Writing a Personal Statement – ‘How to Guide’ from Unifrog

In most cases, the Personal Statement is a candidate’s only chance to describe in their own words their passion for and ability in the subject for which they are applying. Here are 12 tips for making the most of this opportunity.

1. Make every word count

When first approaching the Personal Statement, the 4000-character limit may sound like a lot. By the end of the writing process, it tends to feel like very little. In order to include everything in this short space, students should be efficient with their wording.

Tips for reducing characters:

- Intensifiers such as ‘really’ and ‘always’ should be removed
- Unnecessarily complicated phrasing should be simplified
- Only use surnames when referencing authors/directors/philosophers etc.
- Check for accidental double spaces
- Avoid explaining books, prizes, names etc. - admissions tutors will most likely recognise who/what they are!
- Avoid using lengthy titles for qualifications or prizes (e.g. Extended Project Qualification can be simplified to EPQ)

Example:

Long sentences such as ‘Since a young age, I have always been a keen and enthusiastic scientist, who has really thrived in all scientific subjects’, should be shortened to ‘I am a keen scientist’. Then provide some concrete examples of being a keen scientist!

2. Structure

To maximise space, make detailed writing plans before starting. A further reason for doing this is that a Personal Statement must be easy to follow. Admissions staff have to read thousands of Personal Statements, so make their job easy for them.

At the same time students should not be afraid to tear up their plan if the structure needs changing further down the line. I had to adjust the structure of my Personal Statement four times before I was happy with it. There is no one formula for structuring a Personal Statement, but these are some good questions to reflect on to start with:

- How did you become interested in your subject?
- Which aspect of your subject particularly interests you?
- How has your initial interest expanded into other areas of your subject?
- How would you like to pursue your subject in the future?

3. Focus

The majority (80-90%) of a UK Personal Statement should concentrate on why the candidate will make a great student in their chosen subject. It’s important to keep this front-of-mind in the drafting process.

Tip:

To maintain focus in the Personal Statement, students should ask themselves ‘Does this explain why I am a good applicant?’ at the end of each example or description. Evaluate examples throughout the personal statement in order to answer this question.

Instead of: I wrote an EPQ

Try: The process of writing an EPQ taught me the skills necessary to work independently and conduct my own research: skills which will be invaluable to me at university.

4. Career

If a student is applying for a professional course (Medicine, Occupational Therapy, Architecture etc), they must show that they would be right for the specific career for which the degree will prepare them. Even if the degree is less vocational - like Geography or Sociology - it's a good idea for the student to show that studying the subject fits sensibly into their long-term plans.

Tip:

Include elements of a course that you're excited to study as this will indicate to admissions tutors that you are genuinely interested in exploring their subject in the future.

Instead of: I am excited by the prospect of studying biology

Try: I am particularly excited by the prospect of studying molecular biology and further exploring X

However, students should avoid mentioning specific university courses by name (e.g. why they particularly want to study English at Oxford University), as this may limit their chances at the other universities for which they are applying.

5. Extracurricular

Students should include one paragraph at the end of their Personal Statements summarising their extracurricular interests (hobbies / activities / awards / voluntary work etc). This section must be kept short as discussion of the subject should take priority.

Tip:

Link extracurricular activities back to the chosen subject by showing how they have developed skills that will be useful for that particular degree course.

Examples:

- Completing the Duke of Edinburgh award might teach a Geography student about map reading and navigation.
- Working in a charity shop might improve a Business and Economics student's understanding of the retail industry

6. Sell yourself

The purpose of a Personal Statement is to allow students to sell themselves to their prospective universities. However, perhaps due to British cultural attitudes, many students struggle to write about their strong points (most US students don't seem to have this problem!).

Use strong, assertive language to demonstrate confidence self-belief. Avoid playing down achievements or crediting another person in a Personal Statement.

Tip:

Instead of: "My class helped organise a Geology day for younger pupils at my school"

Try: "I organised a Geology day for younger pupils at my school"

Applicants shouldn't write arrogant and sweeping statements such as 'I have a vast array of skills', which prove nothing to the reader. Instead, they should describe how these skills have been put into practice, and give real evidence of their ability.

7. It's love

One of the best ways for students to sell themselves is to get across their genuine love for the subject for which they are applying. There are two excellent reasons for this. Firstly, the people reading the Statement have often devoted their entire careers to studying this particular subject, so they like to see a similar commitment in the applicant. Secondly, they want to admit students whose enjoyment of the subject will make them motivated to work hard.

To demonstrate their enthusiasm students should emphasise their interest in specific aspects of their subject. Here is an example extract:

"I greatly enjoy the novels of Thomas Hardy, which often feature strong female protagonists. I am eager to explore Hardy's work further, as well as that of other Victorian writers, and am particularly interested in their contrasting presentations of women."

8. Independence

Students should demonstrate a track record of independent learning, and show that their interest in their subject extends beyond the school syllabus.

Examples which demonstrate independence:

- Reading - books, articles, academic journals
- Writing - a personal blog, an article, extra essays or projects
- Experiences - lectures, work experience, competitions outside of school
- Promoting the subject - inviting a speaker to the school, organising a society/club, teaching younger children at school, making a short film
- Other - watching documentaries, listening to podcasts, attending summer schools

Tip:

Avoid lists of random examples. Instead link experiences together to show a natural curiosity in the subject.

Instead of: "I read X and X and then I watched X"

Try: "My interest in X led me to further explore X which interestingly contrasted with X"

9. Avoid cliché

Using quotes is often advocated by online templates. Nelson Mandela's "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world" is a particularly popular one. Using inspirational quotes, however, will only suggest a lack of inspiration. Students should use their own words rather than somebody else's.

The use of tired words and phrases such as 'from a young age', 'interesting', 'passion' and 'team player', can be kept to a minimum by giving more specific, personal descriptions.

Tip:

Instead of: "I have wanted to study history from a young age"

Try: "I have wanted to study history ever since I first visited the Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum and I realised the importance of remembering past events"

10. Stand out

The ideal Personal Statement creates the sense that a student is unique. Students should think of something original about themselves in relation to the subject for which they are applying.

This can often come in the form of an anecdote, or an unusual reason for their initial interest in their subject.

For example, one applicant for Neuroscience from a deeply religious background wrote about how their interest in the difference between rationality and faith led to their fascination with the brain. Applying for English Literature, I wrote about the first novel that ignited my interest in the subject, helping me to convey originality via my personal experience.

Tip:

Avoid shoehorning anecdotes or experiences into a Personal Statement merely for the sake of it. Don't take risks by including jokes or strange facts. Aim for 'personal' rather than 'weird'. It is more important to sound sincere than to sound unusual.

11. Be honest

Avoid the temptation to exaggerate or lie. It will become clear to an admissions tutor if a school or college reference doesn't match up to a pupil's Personal Statement. If a student is called to interview, they will be asked to elaborate on elements of their Personal Statement and it will be obvious if they have falsely claimed to have done something.

12. Check!

Students should have their work checked by several trusted adults. They should do this early in the process to allow time to make changes. Teachers, parents and friends can all help, but must do so one at a time to avoid confusion.

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